

**THE MANAGER****COW COMFORT***By Dean Weidman*

Farm growth is a puzzle that requires a good plan and the right team.

# My Farm Needs to Grow! But Where to Start?

Your farm is growing. You are pushing the limits of your facilities and space. Expansion is the obvious next step. Have you planned for it? How do you begin? How do you ensure it secures your farm's future, makes the best use of resources, improves efficiency and productivity, and centers around what is best for cows. How will you design it? You need a good plan and the right team. Here are a few strategies as you prepare to tackle these challenges.

If you think you don't have time or can't afford a comprehensive expansion plan, think again. You can't afford not to. The planning process takes longer, often significantly, than the building process. Planning a large project can take one or two years, or more. Accept this. Use this opportunity to consider the important questions, and find the answers that will ensure your farm's continued success.

A comprehensive planning process includes site evaluation and discussions about: what your farm has, what you can do and what you might need.

It explores the farm's future direction and what aspects of farm management you enjoy and want to focus on. The process involves all perspectives on your farm, ultimately to create a common vision that draws on the experience of the older generations and innovative ideas of the younger ones. It takes your needs and wants, applies cutting-edge design and technology elements, balances them with your financial capacity, and hones them into a complete, long-term plan. Like assembling a jigsaw puzzle, begin by setting the outer edges in place, and then work towards the center, piecing together the full picture.

Develop a team. Everyone has strengths and limitations. Outside expertise is needed. Start by talking to a site planner and a construction consultant. Then talk to a business planner, lender, vet, nutritionist and technology specialist for their perspectives on possibilities and potential pitfalls.

At first glance, this might seem like a lot of unnecessary people and expense. Bringing together various perspectives in the planning phase is a better use of time and money than trying to bridge those gaps in the building process. They will ask questions and have ideas that never occurred to you. We were

taught to measure twice and cut once for a reason.

Even with a team, you are in control, and the ultimate aim is cow comfort and long-term farm success. Consider all details and angles with your team. Debate merits of different materials, technologies and management strategies. Weigh costs and benefits. Decide how each option will impact your cows, your productivity, and the efficiency of all levels of your operation. What is the impact of new policies and regulations? Does the plan incorporate elements for cost savings and proven returns?

When planning the future of your farm, remember to include immediate and long-term needs. While your focus is the current expansion project, plan for future expansions. When you are ready for the next phase, it is easier to update an existing plan than to begin again. This ensures that you do not limit your options for tomorrow when building for today.

When you do begin to build, prime construction season coincides with spring, summer and fall peak farm activities. A construction or project manager can take leadership. Consider using the construction consultant who was part of your team from the beginning. Select this person carefully as he or she is key to your project finishing on time, on budget and according to plan.

Who can help put this plan and team together? In NY, the new Dairy Acceleration Program, enhances profitability of dairy farms and maintains a commitment to environmentally responsible growth. In Pennsylvania, the Center for Dairy Excellence administers several effective assistance programs.

Statistics show that while the number of farms is in decline, the number of cows per farm is increasing. Careful planning for the future is essential to the long-term viability of your farm in the industry.

## FYI

■ **Dean Weidman** is with Ag Construction Services in Canandaigua, NY. Reach him by phone at 585.775.9205 or by email at dean.weidman@yahoo.com.